

Boris Groys, *Art Power*

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## POST-COMMUNIST AESTHETICS?

Boris Groys made a strong impression with his first book, *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin* (1988)—but more so with its publication in French and English, as *Staline, Œuvre d'art totale* (1990) and *The Total Art of Stalinism* (1992), than with its German original. This belated impact undoubtedly has something to do with the larger role of English and French than of German as languages for the diffusion of discourse on art, but of course it has even more to do with the world-historical changes that had taken place in the intervening years; after the dissolution of the Soviet Union it became easier to read with equanimity a book showing Stalin as a kind of artist. And yet there is still a third reason why the book could be received differently in 1992 than in 1988: the entry of unofficial and conceptual Soviet art into the Western art system—thanks, of course, to the same processes that led to the dismantling of the USSR—but also, to a certain extent, that of Stalin-approved Socialist Realism; shortly after statues of Lenin were toppled all across Eastern Europe, exhibitions of official Soviet art began to appear in venues whose programmes normally reflect a taste for modern and postmodern avant-gardes: the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, in 1992; the P.S.1 gallery, New York, in 1993; the Kassel Documenta Hall, in 1993.

There had occasionally been exhibitions of unofficial Soviet art in the past, primarily drawn from the collections of Westerners who had managed to smuggle it out of the country. Only around 1986 did state-approved exhibitions of it become possible. Soviet artists were quickly swept up by the Western art market and in 1988 Sotheby's held its initial Moscow auction. Writing in 1990, on the occasion of the first major American museum exhibition of Soviet conceptual art, one of its curators, David Ross, observed that

'Moscow in July of 1988 had a smell of land-rush fever to it, as a literal horde of American and European art dealers, collectors, journalists and carpet-baggers descended on Moscow for the auction.' Whether this gold-rush ever amounted to a genuine reception of nonconformist art remains dubious. Certainly few of the artists whose works sold for astronomical prices twenty years ago are still considered major figures internationally. Nonetheless, an acquaintance with this art remains the best preparation for understanding Groys's work, both in *The Total Art of Stalinism* and since, despite the fact that it is not the subject of that book.

That a certain art became known as unofficial or nonconformist can be misleading if it is taken to imply that its makers were 'dissidents' in the sense that one uses the word of writers and activists like Andrei Sakharov or Alexander Solzhenitsyn. They were not primarily protesting against a despotic order. Soviet conceptual art (and literature) faced social and political realities with neither dissent nor assent, but with an uncanny neutrality that endows its best works with a disquieting air of paradox. In this neutrality—evident in such well-known paintings as Erik Bulatov's *Brezhnev in Crimea*, 1981–85, or Komar & Melamid's *I Saw Stalin Once When I Was a Child*, 1981–82 (produced after their emigration to the United States, and now in the collection of MoMA, New York)—it is actually closer to the mainstream of American pop art than to the conceptual art with which it shares a name. Pop, the art that drove the critics of the early 1960s to demand whether one was supposed 'to regard our popular signboard culture with greater fondness or insight now that we have Rosenquist? Or is he exhorting us to revile it—that is, to do what has come naturally to every sane and sensitive person in this country for years?' One can easily imagine a follower of Solzhenitsyn reacting similarly to a painting by Bulatov, just as an admirer of the Russian avant-garde of the early twentieth century would wonder if Bulatov means the viewer to esteem or to revile his stylistic models in the work of Socialist Realist painters of the 1920s and 1930s like Isaak Brodsky and Alexander Gerasimov. And today, as Groys points out in his new book of essays, *Art Power*, 'in Russia, the former dissident culture is dismissed for still being "too Soviet".'

It is precisely this kind of sphinx-like neutrality that Groys displayed toward 'his' Stalin. Asserting that 'Stalinist poetics is the immediate heir to Constructivist poetics' insofar as it 'satisfied the fundamental avant-garde demand that art cease representing life and begin transforming it by means of a total aesthetic-political project', Groys contradicted every standard interpretation of Soviet art history. Yet he was hardly, as it seemed to some readers at the time, denigrating the utopian aspirations of the Russian avant-garde any more than he was extolling the author of the Great Purge as a model artist. The effect of his argument was to undermine the Manichean legend

of heroic avant-gardists defeated by dictatorial power and contest the belief, still unquestioningly asserted by textbooks today, that Socialist Realism 'conflicted profoundly with the already existing practices of the Soviet avant-garde' and was merely

a historically and geopolitically specific variant of the universally prevailing antimodernist tendencies of the late twenties and thirties: the *rappel à l'ordre* in France, Neue Sachlichkeit in Germany, Nazi painting in the Third Reich, fascist neoclassicism in Mussolini's Italy, and the various forms of social realism in the United States.

Groys, by contrast, denied that Socialist Realism was inherently alien to the revolutionary energies of Soviet avant-garde art. Instead he argued that it took from the avant-garde a sense of the aesthetic as a total project for the formation of society.

This sense of the aesthetic was a subject of fascination for the Soviet conceptualists of the 1970s—though in the absence, in their case, of any alliance with a power offering any possibility of realizing such a project—and Groys's work can for this reason be seen as an offshoot of theirs. It is not surprising, therefore, that the roots of his project are not in academic art history or aesthetics. Born to Russian parents in Berlin in 1947, he grew up in Leningrad and studied mathematical logic at Leningrad State University before becoming a research fellow in the Department of Structural and Applied Linguistics at Moscow State University. He emigrated to Germany in 1981 and gained a PhD in Philosophy at the University of Münster (he has since gone on to teach in Karlsruhe and New York). His connection to art was forged through a direct involvement in the underground art and literary scene, dating back to his student years in Leningrad. 'I liked the art of Kabakov, Bulatov, Prigov and some other unofficial artists', Groys has said, 'and began to write about them—partly because nobody else did at that time'. To understand that Groys is as much an artist as a theorist (let alone a historian) goes some way toward explaining why the apparent faults of his intellectual style—the weakness for breathtaking generalizations immune to empirical validation, the self-contradictions he always seems to resolve by sleight of hand into shrewd paradoxes, the florid originality—have their uses: he is a straightfaced comedian, a sophist whose aim is more to jar the reader's preconceptions than to replace them with more securely founded views.

Since *The Total Art of Stalinism*, Groys has continued to publish regularly in German—principal works have included *Über das Neue* (1992), *Topologie der Kunst* (2003) and *Die Kunst des Denkens* (2007)—as well as, more recently, to produce essays in the form of video. Many of his books have been translated into French and other languages, but except for scattered

essays, most of his subsequent writings have been unavailable in English, the exception being *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* (2006), a brief but trenchant essay on one of the artist's key early installations. *Art Power* gathers fifteen previously published essays dating from 1997 onward. While this collection hardly makes up for the absence in English of Groys's more substantial works, it offers a taste of their style and glimpses of their content. Even in small doses, it becomes clear that he remains one of the more intriguing if sometimes infuriating thinkers in the contemporary art world.

The essays in *Art Power* are grouped into two untitled sections, the first mainly dealing with the contemporary Western art system and its institutions: the museum, criticism, curating and so on—themes treated at greater length in *Über das Neue*. The second group of essays follows up instead on questions related to *The Total Art of Stalinism* and *Das kommunistische Postskriptum*: art, power and their alliance in the projected creation of a new world. Despite their miscellaneous origin, each of the two sets of essays has a clear implicit argument. In the Western art system, as Groys explains in the first part of the book, there reigns a 'logic of aesthetic equal rights'—anything, after Duchamp, can be an artwork—and yet differences in artistic value are still pertinent. The reason is that 'good artwork is precisely that work which affirms the formal equality of all images under the conditions of their factual inequality.' It is the museum, he explains, that makes this possible, as the site where observers can learn to discriminate among images as historical phenomena—something that the open market and mass media are unable to do. Museums do not just conserve the past; they effectively generate the new by allowing it to emerge from the background of familiarity. The museum cannot predict the appearance of the new but 'shows what it must not look like'. Yet because the newness of art emerges from a process of comparison and differentiation, the work of art can never be revealed in its full presence; art is understood to be something essentially unrepresentable and art objects tend to become documents of art. Only the installation of the work gives it 'the here and now of a historical event'—'If reproduction makes copies out of originals, installation makes originals out of copies.' This phenomenon reaches an extreme in the case of digital imagery, where the underlying information is sublimely invisible. 'So we can say: the digital image is a copy—but the event of its visualization is an original event.'

Eventually, of course, the newness of new art fades and becomes simple difference—difference from all the other works that share space in the museum of things that need not be redone. 'The need then emerges to replace the old new with the new new, in order to restore the romantic feeling of the infinite real'—the real being everything outside the museum. Ordinary things become different when they enter its portals; one thinks

of Arthur Danto's phrase: it is the place where the 'transfiguration of the commonplace' occurs. In Groys's formulation, 'the museum provides the possibility of introducing the sublime into the banal. In the Bible, we can find the famous statement that there is nothing new under the sun. That is, of course, true. But there is no sun inside the museum.' The market, unlike the museum, is based on a logic of difference that does not aim at the new. Presumably this is why, as Groys notes, the 'museum value' of a work need not correspond to its market value.

In essence, what the museum provides is a space of disinterested contemplation such as aesthetics has always called for. Contemporary mass media have nothing to do with this, but in a different way, neither do the arts of totalitarian states such as the Soviet Union. Today, through the media, 'terrorists and warriors themselves are beginning to act as artists', as Groys says in the second part of *Art Power*. 'Video art especially has become the medium of choice for contemporary warriors . . . The act of war coincides with its documentation, with its representation.' Likewise, 'politically explosive problems are ignited almost exclusively by images': Danish cartoons, for instance. But the new warrior art has taken its cues, not from the traditional aesthetic glorification of the conqueror, but from the modernist cult of destructiveness, cruelty and disfiguration. There remains, however, an important difference between the contemporary artist-warrior and the modernist artist: in place of the critique of representation conducted by the latter, the former 'tries to create images that have a claim to be true or real—beyond any criticism of representation'. The artist is fundamentally iconoclastic and the warrior, an iconophile.

The theme of an art that would no longer be a form of representation, but of action, re-emerges in the essay, 'The Hero's Body: Adolf Hitler's Art Theory'. Hitler called for an art that would not simply represent heroism, but would produce heroic individuals. 'The ultimate artwork' is 'the viewer whom the heroic politics makes into a member of the heroic race. The true art of politics is, for Hitler, the art of the continuous production of heroic bodies.' Similarly, Stalinist culture inherited the fundamentally modernist desire to break with any actually existing public in order to form a new one, as Groys emphasizes in 'Educating the Masses: Socialist Realist Art'. Contrary to Clement Greenberg's assertion in 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1939) that the Soviet Union encouraged 'kitsch' because that was what pleased the masses, Groys asserts that, given the absence of a market in which the artwork had to prove itself, 'the actual tastes of the masses were completely irrelevant to the art practices of Socialist Realism, more irrelevant, even, than they were to the avant-garde.' Despite the conservative appearance of Socialist Realist art, it was part of a project 'in many ways more radically modern in its rejection of the past' than anything envisaged by the West and its cult of

creative destruction, à la Schumpeter. Thus the dismantling of the Soviet Union and its culture is experienced as a progression from the future to the past. 'Post-Communist life is life lived backward, a movement against the flow of time.' Western mass culture, too, creates artificial communities without a past—'the source of their enormous potential for modernization, so often overlooked'—but gives little scope for these temporary communities to recognize themselves as such.

It is often held that artistic forms and positions have political implications, but Groys's emphasis falls on something that is far more rarely noticed, and if there is an essential point to take away from his work it is this: that political forms have aesthetic implications and are dependent on them. 'Radical politics', writes Groys,

cannot be dissociated from a certain aesthetic taste—the taste for the universal, for the zero degree of diversity. On the other hand, liberal, market-oriented politics is correlated with the preference for diversity, difference, openness and heterogeneity. Today, the postmodern taste still prevails. Radical political projects have almost no chance today of being accepted by the public because they do not correlate with the dominant aesthetic sensibility.

If we could only learn to love the grey, monotonous and overwhelming Soviet architecture of the 60s, we could still become Communists.

Groys never tells whether he thinks we should reclaim the austere aesthetics of Soviet Communism, merely observing that it is possible that we could, though to do so would entail falling out with the polymorphous aesthetic of liberalism to which we are accustomed. What are the politics of Groys's own terse and paradoxical style? Dialectical materialism as propounded by Stalin, on his account in *Das kommunistische Postskriptum*, is paradoxical thinking *par excellence*, since it must always embody both the unity and conflict of opposites: 'a deviation was not defined as such on the basis of the position taken, but on the basis of the refusal to consider equally true the contrary of what it affirmed.' Unwilling to call himself a Marxist, let alone a Stalinist, Groys nonetheless attributes to the dictator something like his own gnomic manner of thinking. The essential unresolved question behind Groys's work would appear to be that of the inability of the putatively universalizing aesthetic of the expansive and happily pluralistic capitalist market to incorporate, along with everything else, the totalizing aesthetic of a closed order committed to a radical project.

Groys bluntly states that his aim in *Art Power* is 'to find more space . . . for art functioning as political propaganda'—that is, for the art of revolutionary movements and totalitarian societies. However, his interest in such art is primarily historical, if not nostalgic. When he encounters any form of image-making that fulfills such a function in the present—not, of course,

the politically topical art that arises as one of the multiplicity of possible positions within the pluralistic field of the global contemporary art market, but in, for instance, terrorist videos of beheadings or their Western counterparts, the images from Abu Ghraib—he must concur with the consensus that denies such things can be contemplated as art. This is not only because of ‘all the ethical and political considerations and evaluations’ which ‘are more or less obvious’, or even because there is no artistic author-function at work within such images, but also because of their lack of self-criticality. One can only agree. But in view of Groys’s seductive vision of an art that would reject all present reception in favour of an implacable idea of the future, it is somehow disappointing that he never really takes a position that would earn him a burning at the stake. Admittedly, his swerves away from danger are always eminently logical, even virtuosically so. Groys possesses a genius for brilliantly provocative formulations whose upshot usually turns out to be less shocking than one had thought it would be. This is not to deny that he is one of the most astute commentators on the art scene today but to show how difficult it is, in this context, to move from the desire for radicality to its attainment.